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ABSTRACT

The description of, or formation of impressions about, persons are viewed as being dependent on situational context and the standard or reference point to which the persons are compared. A study is described in which different subject groups compared a target's score on a "cautiousness-boldness" or a "relaxation-alertness" test with either a single reference point or with 2 divergent reference points. It was hypothesized that the relative amount of disagreement observed among subjects judging a target against 2 reference points could be predicted from 2 single reference-point descriptions of the target. Results support the hypothesis leading the author to conclude that one reason why judges form different impressions of the same target is that they are responding to different aspects of the stimulus situation. (TL)

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DETERMINANTS OF DISAGREEMENT IN PERSONALITY DESCRIPTIONS

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Determinants of Disagreement in
Personality Descriptions

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Abstract

A model was developed to predict disagreement in target (T) descriptions among Ss with two simultaneously available comparison standards or reference points (R_1 , R_2). College students given either one or two reference points each rated one target on a scale of either cautiousness or relaxation. It was predicted that disagreement about T among Ss with both R_1 and R_2 available would increase with the difference between the mean description of T compared only to R_1 and the mean description of T compared only to R_2 . A significant correlation (.76, $p < .05$) between predicted and observed intersubject disagreement supported the hypothesis.

Determinants of Disagreement in
Personality Descriptions¹

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The formation of impressions from inconsistent information has frequently been studied by having subjects describe a target said to possess conflicting traits (e.g., Asch, 1946; Haire and Grunes, 1950; Gollin, 1954; 1958). For instance, Gollin's (1954) subjects described a female who appeared kind in some scenes of a film and promiscuous in others. However, instead of specifying the target's position on two different trait dimensions, inconsistency can also be produced by stating that the target holds two positions on one dimension. In this case, subjects might judge a target said to be both kind and unkind.

Investigators of the contrast effect such as Helson (1964) have shown that the judgment of a target stimulus depends on the standard or "reference point" to which it is compared. Thus, one way of attributing two different degrees of the same trait to a target would be to compare his behavior to two different reference points simultaneously.

Multiple reference points are not uncommonly encountered in everyday life. One example is found in the study of World War II military attitudes by Stouffer and his colleagues (1949). They pointed out that in deciding how deprived they were, soldiers stationed overseas but not engaged in combat had two salient reference groups. They could feel deprived by comparing themselves to soldiers stationed at home or they could feel relatively com-

fortable by comparing themselves to combat troops.

In the present study, the target and reference points were presented in the context of a man who wished to join a team which played with several others in a league. All league members were said to take a test of either "cautiousness-boldness" or "relaxation-alertness" scored from 0 to 100 with low scores indicating greater cautiousness or relaxation. Subjects were given the test score of the target and, as reference points, the average scores of the team and the league he wished to join. They then described the target by selecting one of 12 expressions ranging from "extremely cautious" or "extremely relaxed" to "extremely bold" or "extremely alert", depending upon the test the target was said to have taken. The response list for the "cautiousness-boldness" condition appears in Table 1. Thus, one group was

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

told that the average league member scored 50 on the "cautiousness-boldness" test, the average team member scored 10 and were then asked to choose an expression to describe a target who scored 45.

The earlier studies of response to inconsistent information found that subjects tended to two main impression-formation strategies. Some subjects based their impressions on only some of the target's traits and ignored any conflicting ones. Others took all the target's traits into account. For instance, some of Gollin's (1954) subjects considered the female in the film "to be either entirely immoral or an entirely nice person (p. 66)." Others "characterized the star in terms of both behavioral themes" (p. 66) by viewing her as both kind and promiscuous and in some cases, attempted to explain

away the apparent inconsistency.

It was postulated that two similar strategies would be used to form impressions in the present situation. The first strategy would be to compare the target to one of the reference points and to ignore the other. For example, when told that the league average test score was 50, the team average was 10 and the target scored 45, a subject might consider only that the target scored somewhat less than the league and call him "slightly cautious." Or, he might consider only that the target scored much higher than the team and call him "very bold." The second strategy would be to compare the target to both reference points. A subject using this approach might reason that since the target is "slightly cautious" compared to the league average but "very bold" compared to the team, he should compromise and select an expression falling between these two extremes on the response list such as "somewhat bold."

In general, it was thought that a subject with two reference points could choose as an appropriate target description either the expression best describing the target compared only to the upper reference point, or the expression best describing the target compared only to the lower reference point, or any expression falling between these two.

The number of expressions which could appropriately describe the target should depend upon the target's relation to its two reference points. In the example discussed above, the target scoring 45 fell between the two reference points 10 and 50. We said that any expression from "slightly cautious" to "very bold" could appropriately describe this target. But suppose the target scoring 45 were judged against reference points of 40 and 50. Com-

pared to the team average of 40, he might appear "slightly bold." Compared to the league score of 50, he is "slightly cautious." In this case, there are fewer appropriate target descriptions than in the first example.

The more appropriate expressions a group of subjects has to choose from, the more they should disagree when asked to select the one expression that describes the target best. Therefore, if the present model of judgment is valid, disagreement among subjects given two reference points should increase with the number of expressions which could appropriately describe the target.

But how can the number of appropriate target descriptions be calculated? Recall that the range of appropriate expressions was said to extend from the expression best describing the target compared to one of its reference points to the expression best describing it compared to the other reference point. Therefore, independent groups of subjects were asked to compare each target to only one of its reference points. The ranks of the mean expressions chosen by each pair of single-reference-point groups were then subtracted to predict the relative amount of disagreement among other subjects judging the target against both reference points simultaneously. For instance, one group of subjects compared the target scoring 45 to the league average of 50. Another compared the same target to the team average of 10. The mean descriptions gathered from these 2 groups were then subtracted to predict the amount of disagreement among a third group comparing the target to both the team and the league.

Thus, the experiment was designed to test the hypothesis that the relative amount of disagreement observed among subjects judging a target

against two reference points could be predicted from the two single-reference-point descriptions of that target. Each of the 457 college subjects described one target compared to either one or two reference points. The eight double-reference-point conditions are schematized in the lower two lines of Figure 1. Four double-reference groups compared targets scoring 5, 15, 45 or 55 to the reference points 10 and 50. The other four groups judged targets scoring 25, 35, 45 or 55 against the reference points 30 and 50. As the upper three lines of Figure 1 indicate, each target was compared to both of its reference points singly. Disagreement among subjects comparing each target to two reference points was predicted by subtracting the mean description obtained from subjects comparing the target only to the upper of these two reference points from the mean description given by subjects comparing the target only to the lower reference point. Disagreement within each double-reference-point condition was measured by computing the standard deviation of the ranks of the descriptive expressions chosen by subjects judging each target against two reference points.

The data appear in Figure 2. The broken lines represent the amount of disagreement predicted by the model. The solid lines represent the disagreement observed among double-reference-point subjects. The predictions matched the observed disagreement relatively closely when the reference-points were 10 and 50. The fit was less exact when test scores of 30 and 50 served as reference points. The accuracy of the predictions was assessed by correlating predicted and observed disagreement over the eight double-reference-point conditions. The correlation was found to be .76, indicating that the model accounted for about 58% of the variance between conditions.

Thus, the experiment demonstrated that the relative amount of disagreement among subjects with two reference points can be predicted from the mean descriptions of subjects judging the target against each of the reference points separately. This suggests that one reason why judges form different impressions of the same target is that they are responding to different aspects of the stimulus situation.

In addition to its ability to predict interjudge disagreement, the model appears to have at least two further uses. First, it might be extended into the area of communication to predict that the degree to which an audience correctly interprets a speaker's statement such as "Jones is fairly kind", will depend upon their awareness of the speaker's reference points. Moreover, the data showed that a wide range of target descriptions were elicited when subjects judged a target which fell between two relatively dispersed reference points. For instance, considerable disagreement occurred among subjects judging a target scoring 45 against the reference points 10 and 50. The model might therefore provide a method of attributing inconsistent characteristics to targets. That is, it could be used to generate stimuli for further studies of the effect of situational variables and personality factors on individuals' response to inconsistent information.

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Footnotes

- ¹ Based on a paper presented at the Canadian Psychological Association, St. John's, Newfoundland, June 1971. The data were gathered as part of the author's doctoral dissertation submitted to Stanford University, 1971.

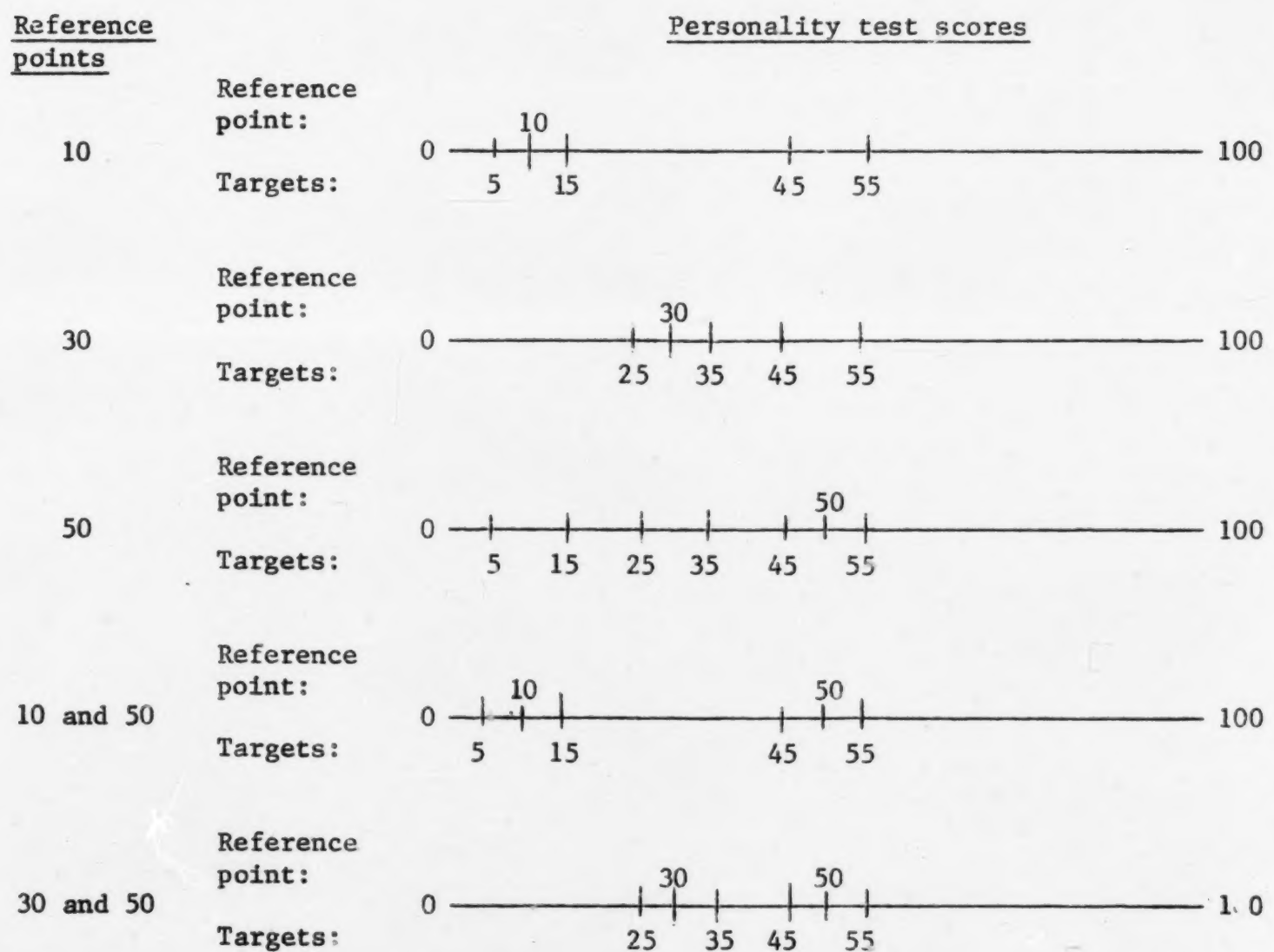
TABLE 1

Response Alternatives Presented to
Subjects Judging a Target's
"Cautiousness-Boldness"

extremely bold
highly bold
very bold
quite bold
somewhat bold
slightly bold
slightly cautious
somewhat cautious
quite cautious
very cautious
highly cautious
extremely cautious

FIGURE 1

Targets and reference points presented
to subjects



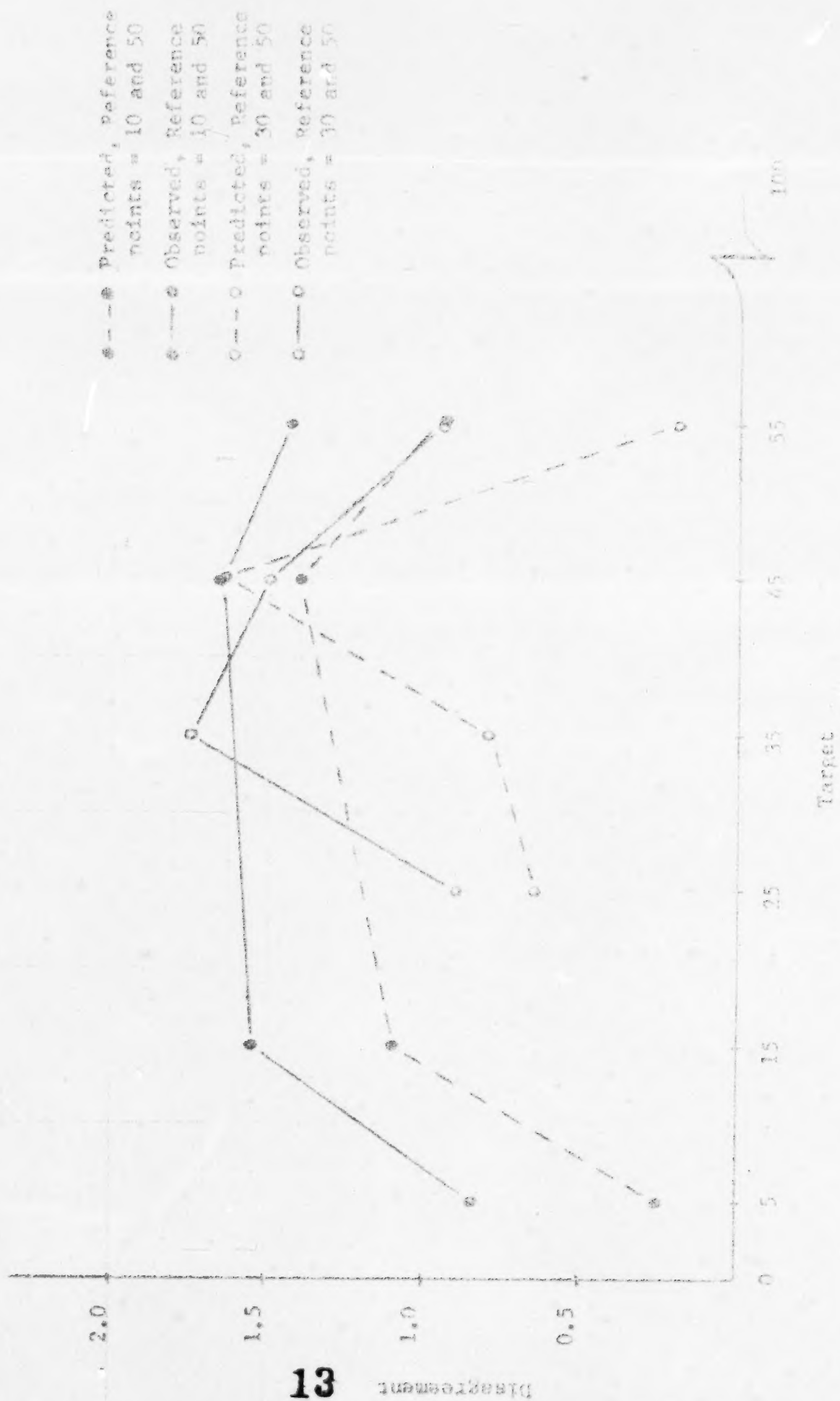


Figure 2. Predicted and observed intersubject disagreement